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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses the ways in which counselors in middle schools can help youngsters face the challenges of early adolescence and prepare them for life in high school. It focuses on: (1) understanding one's self; (2) family relationships; (3) peer pressure and drug abuse; (4) stressful lives; (5) sexual maturation; (6) academics; and (7) career exploration. (TE)

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The Challenge of Counseling in Middle Schools

Edwin R. Gerler, Jr.

Introduction

Counselors in middle schools work with young people whose lives are in constant flux. Early adolescence is a time of physical, intellectual, emotional, and social development, during which young people confront the question, "Who am I?" The young adolescent's search for identity involves many challenges (Gerler, Hogan, & O'Rourke, 1990).

This digest deals with how counselors in middle schools can help youngsters face the various challenges of early adolescence. Counselors are called upon to plan programs that make middle schools inviting places for young people to learn and grow.

There are major differences between middle schools and high schools, differences that cause some students to get lost emotionally and to fail academically. Middle school counseling programs need to focus on preparing youngsters for the increased independence of life in high school that is typically accompanied by more social pressures and by increased stress.

The Challenge of Understanding Self

Early adolescence is difficult for most youngsters, a time for challenging one's self and the ideas brought from childhood. It is the beginning of physical, emotional, social, and intellectual growth which brings excitement, delight, anxiety, and misunderstanding. The child, who in elementary school was obedient and academically motivated, may seem disrespectful and lazy in middle school. Early adolescence begins the transition from acceptance of adult direction to challenging authority and moving toward self direction. The goal of middle school counselors is to provide a blend of challenge and support that will promote identity development in early adolescence.

Middle school students need the guidance and direction of effective counselors to begin the major developmental task of adolescence which is to achieve a clear sense of self (Marcia, 1980). The confusion that reigns in early adolescence creates a challenging climate for the young person and for those trying to help the youngster manage the difficulties associated with leaving childhood for a new stage of life. Counselors implement various practical strategies to help middle school students move toward self understanding. These strategies include such activities as maintaining daily journals, group counseling, and developmental classroom programs that offer young people opportunities for self exploration.

The Challenges of Family Relationships

As young people begin to seek their own identities, they face the challenge of leaving behind much of their early dependence on home and family. Parents and family members, however, should continue to provide structure and support during the difficult moments adolescents face in growing away from complete dependence on home. The so-called traditional family, however, has virtually disappeared in America. Divorce, single-parent homes, and step-families are a fact of life confronting youngsters. In the climate of changing families, middle school counselors need to be prepared to help youngsters and their parents understand one another and to work together in making the difficult choices that occur during adolescence. Middle school counselors need to be especially aware of dysfunctional aspects of students' families in order to develop counseling strategies and guidance programs that help young adolescents find themselves (Wegscheider, 1981). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, counselors need to be aware of cultural differences that students bring from their homes into middle school life and into the search for personal identities.

The Challenges of Peer Pressure and Drug Abuse

Early adolescence is a time of experimentation with new behaviors and of reliance on peers for guidance and direction. This combination can have devastating effects on young people's lives if it results in experimentation with alcohol and other drugs. Young people who begin to use alcohol and other mind altering substances during their middle school years may be especially prone to the problem of addiction later in adolescence and into adulthood (Welte & Barnes, 1985).

Most middle schools are not prepared to offer adequate prevention programs to help youngsters challenge the social pressure to experiment with drugs. In fact, the current status of drug education in schools throughout the United States is ambiguous at best. Theory-based prevention programs that have been tested offer hope that drug abuse prevention programs will improve. Assertiveness training programs, for example, that are designed to help adolescents resist peer pressure, seem to offer middle school counselors intriguing ideas for program development. In addition, cognitive-development programs that are intended to raise the psychological maturity of youngsters and improve their decision-making offer considerable hope for middle school counseling programs.

Middle school counselors must understand the relationship between peer pressure and substance abuse and develop counseling strategies that are designed to help young adolescents deal with the pressures to use drugs.

The Challenges of Stressful Lives

Students in middle schools frequently complain about the stress they experience in their everyday lives (Elkind, 1990). Typical adolescent complaints include "Everyone is watching for me to make mistakes" and "I never have any time for myself." Adults sometimes have a tendency to discount what adolescents say, believing that most of the stress youngsters experience will pass as

maturation occurs. This lack of empathy on the part of adults may leave adolescents feeling misunderstood and alienated.

Middle school counselors must implement programs that help young adolescents deal with many stressful circumstances. Desensitization programs that help in overcoming undue fears and relaxation programs that attempt to relieve stress may help young adolescents develop confidence and hope for the future.

The Challenge of Sexual Maturation

Physical maturation, and particularly sexual maturation, has significant effects on self-concept and social relationships during the middle school years. Most young adolescents dwell on how to make themselves more attractive and acceptable to their peers. One of the many difficult challenges for middle school counselors is to attend to the concerns of adolescents about physical maturation and sexuality.

Much has been written about adolescent sexuality, in particular, about topics such as friendship, sexual identity, and adolescent pregnancy. Middle school counselors must implement programs that take into account the impact of physical and sexual maturation on students' lives. Counselors should especially work to prepare adolescents to meet the challenging issues surrounding contraception and teen pregnancy (Smith, Nenney, & McGill, 1986).

The Challenge of Academics

Americans are becoming increasingly aware of the need for schools to promote academic excellence. Individuals in the business community and elsewhere complain that young people do not have the basic academic skills necessary for economic success in a competitive world. Governmental and private commissions have noted the high dropout rate in America's schools and the generally poor record of public schools in promoting academic excellence. Educators in the United States must account for the failure of schools to motivate young people to stay in school and to strive for high levels of academic achievement.

Middle school counselors can contribute to schools' efforts at improving academic achievement among young teenagers (Gerler, Drew, & Mohr, 1990). These days middle schoolers often have considerable freedom. Many are latchkey children who may choose what to do when they arrive home from a day at school. More often than not they choose leisure, neglecting their academic responsibilities. Middle school counselors should collaborate with teachers to implement programs that help youngsters develop a reasonable "work ethic."

Middle school counselors can play an important role in helping young people see themselves as capable students who have the potential to realize academic success. Counselors should take the lead in transforming low achieving and disruptive adolescents into model students.

The Challenge of Career Exploration

In the search for identity, young adolescents struggle not only with the question of "Who am I?" but also with the question "Who will I become?" The latter question is often answered in terms of future occupation. Adolescents face an ever-changing world of work, a fact that is often neglected by overburdened middle school counselors. The economic, political, and social changes that have brought women and minorities into the work force in large numbers have altered how youngsters must be prepared to enter the world of work (Hoyt & Shylo, 1987). Middle school counselors have many opportunities to promote career development and career exploration among young people.

It is especially important for young adolescents to learn the skills that will eventually help them achieve gainful employment. These skills include how to write a resume, how to fill out a job application, and how to interview effectively for a job. Middle school counselors must be especially attentive to the special needs of exceptional students in the area of career exploration.

The Challenge of Organizing a Counseling Program in Middle Schools

The challenge for middle school counselors is to develop focused programs that meet specific developmental needs of young adolescents. Much like the students they serve, middle school counselors must develop their own professional identities which are expressed in well defined and accountable school guidance programs. Middle school counselors cannot do everything. They are faced with issues such as dysfunctional families, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, teen suicide, sexual abuse, school dropouts, and numerous other difficult matters. Counselors, therefore, must set priorities and develop programs to meet those priorities. Preventive and developmental programs seem to be the most promising and cost-effective approaches to counseling with young adolescents in middle schools. Such programs are likely to help young adolescents satisfactorily address the question, "Who am I?"

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